DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 311 CE 067 696

AUTHOR Lankard, Bettina A.
TITLE Cultural Diversity and Teamwork. ERIC Digest No. 152.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CE-94-152
PUB DATE 94
CONTRACT RR93002001
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Education; Classroom Techniques; *Communication Skills; *Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Differences; Educational Needs; *Educational Strategies; Skill Development; *Teamwork; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

In today's society, when increasing numbers of employees are being expected to work in teams and when cultural diversity is becoming commonplace in schools and workplaces, it is imperative that vocational and career educators prepare students for future interactions in a culturally diverse workplace. Communication differences between generations, genders, races, and cultures have been examined in recent best sellers and in professional publications in the field of education. The following strategies, which have been synthesized from publications dealing with various aspects/levels of education, are recommended for use by educators preparing students to interact with one another and work together in teams: nurture students' respect for other viewpoints, develop students' critical thinking skills, affirm the presence and validity of different learning styles, encourage equitable participation in the classroom, and emphasize the importance of teamwork in a multicultural society. Businesses and educators alike are recognizing the changing demographics of the labor force and are developing an awareness of the implications of changing customer profiles, staffing patterns, and student populations. The multicultural composition of the United States poses a challenge to educators; however, education for work in a multicultural society has significant value. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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Cultural Diversity and Teamwork

by Bettina A. Lankard

1994

EDO-CE-94-152

The practice of working in teams is becoming more prevalent in all types of organizations. Interdepartmental teams are formed to engage workers in collaborative efforts to resolve problems, integrate new programs and/or processes, and engage in long-range planning. Interdisciplinary, cross-functional teams are formed to bring together all stakeholders in an organization to improve communication, increase involvement, improve quality and efficiency, and increase productivity (Sutcliffe and Pollock 1992). Merely putting people in teams, however, does not guarantee that the teams will be effective. Getting people to work together—to listen to every member, to consider all viewpoints, and to exercise courtesy and respect for each other—has always been a challenge. In today's society, when cultural diversity is common in schools and workplaces, good communication has become an even greater challenge. This ***ERIC Digest*** examines cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices as they influence communication style. It presents strategies that can be used by vocational and career educators to prepare students for future interactions in a culturally diverse workplace.

The Challenge of Communication

Communication differences between generations, genders, races, and cultures have been the subject of some recent best sellers, such as ***You Just Don't Understand: Conversations between Men and Women*** (Deborah Tannen) and ***The Joy Luck Club*** (Amy Tan). These books illustrate that "what I say is not necessarily what you hear . . . even when you are listening." The problem with communication is that people harbor certain beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and values that cause them to interpret messages as they listen to the words. Their hypotheses about what is happening and what might happen are based on personal experiences or familiar cultural patterns that influence their actions. For example, if experience leads a person to believe that someone who doesn't look him or her in the eye is unfriendly or untruthful, that person's response to the individual will reflect that belief. In a society characterized by pluralism, where the meanings of various behaviors and practices are as diverse as the people demonstrating them, incorrect assumptions easily lead to miscommunication.

Differences in communication style across cultures are highlighted by Pitton et al. (1993) in a synthesis of culturally specific nonverbal behaviors. In their report, the authors make generalizations about certain cultures—that some groups find direct eye contact preferable or acceptable, whereas others consider it intrusive, inappropriate, and even shameful. Pitton et al. suggest that some cultures emphasize the emotional quality of a conversation more than the words or context of the message, whereas other cultures consider the expression of emotion to be inappropriate. These culturally learned tendencies can influence communication among members of a diverse group. For example, members of more reserved cultures may be less inclined to speak out in a group discussion, or, when they do, to speak in low or soft voices, thus allowing the strong, assertive, and loud voices to dominate the conversation (Pitton et al. 1993).

Gender differences are also reflected in the communication styles of men and women. Wood (1993) touches on this subject, describing women's voices as the voices of caring and men's voices as voices of fairness. "The voice of caring emphasizes the responsibilities people have by virtue of their relationship with each other. . . . The voice of fairness assumes that what we 'owe' to others and are entitled to expect from others depends on our rights" (p. 85). This orientation—caring versus fairness—may explain what men and women find most frustrating in their conversations with each other: the male's penchant for giving advice rather than attending to feelings and the female's focus on feelings rather than judicious problem solving.

Strategies for Dealing with Diversity

When there are so many variables in a diverse culture—demographic variables such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, and geographic location and ethnographic variables such as nationality, race, ethnicity, language, and religion—how can educators prepare students so that they will be able to interact with each other and work together in teams? The following strategies are recommended.

Nurture Students' Respect for Other Viewpoints. Wood (1993) defines respect as "recognizing that a perspective other than your own can be legitimate, equal in validity to the way you view the world. Respect does not require personal acceptance of another's position, yet it goes beyond mere toleration" (p. 86). Leading students to consider different cultural perspectives may result in feelings of discomfort until they come to understand that "agreement about what we know does not imply that we need to agree about what it means" (Fried 1993, p. 126). The instructor can facilitate understanding by assuming the role of inquiry guide rather than information authority and encouraging students to discuss their discomfort and explain its origin.

Develop Students' Critical Thinking Skills. To communicate effectively in the midst of diversity, students need to understand how to "organize data; and analyze, synthesize, and draw conclusions while recognizing the 'power that emotions, values, and personal experience have in shaping one's interpretation of information'" (ibid., p. 126). Fried identifies three sets of skills students need to learn in this regard: (1) separating facts from cultural assumptions and beliefs about those facts; (2) shifting perspective; and (3) differentiating between personal discomfort and intellectual disagreement. Fried recommends that students be "encouraged to explore their own beliefs and cultural assumptions about an event and their effect on interpretation of course material" (p. 127). By sharing their insights with each other, students will gain a greater understanding of the value of each

person's frame of reference in interpreting information. With increased experience and self-disclosure, students will begin to distinguish among facts, beliefs, values, and personal experience, learning when to challenge and disagree and when to exercise understanding and acceptance.

Affirm the Presence and Validity of Different Learning Styles. Anderson and Adams (1992) identify two types of learners: relational learners and analytical learners. Relational learners "place an emphasis on affective and reality-based learning, a broad and personal approach to the processing of information, a search for relevance and personal meaning in what is taught, and a need for qualitative feedback" (p. 22). Analytical learners place an emphasis on the information itself, exhibit sequential and structural thinking, are more task oriented academically, and more easily learn material that is inanimate and impersonal. In a multicultural classroom, successful teachers tend to use a variety of teaching strategies to accommodate the different learning styles of their students.

Encourage Equitable Participation in the Classroom. Studies analyzing classroom dynamics show that teachers interact more with male students than female students and with white males more than minority males. The studies also show that "compared to white males, all female students and minority males are more likely to be quiet in class and less likely to assume a powerful role in discussion" (Sadker and Sadker 1992, p. 50). To encourage equitable participation in the classroom, Sadker and Sadker suggest the following teacher practices:

- Code the class in order to track how many times each student is called on and make the participation more equal.
- Increase the wait time after each question. Studies show that all students benefit from more wait time, especially those who are less assertive and reluctant to participate.
- Become a facilitator rather than a gatekeeper of classroom interaction. Distribute the leadership for ensuring participation of all.
- Desegregate student seating to encourage the distribution of attention from the white and male clusters in the classroom.

Emphasize the Importance of Teamwork in a Multicultural Society. Working in teams of culturally diverse individuals is an activity today's youth will encounter as they enter the work force. "Organizations are realizing that a focus on teamwork, employee participation, and empowerment can lead to a more efficient and innovative organization and thus to a sustainable competitive advantage" (Bond and Pyle 1994, p. 10). Young people need to be made aware that their career success may very well depend on their ability to work together with culturally diverse populations.

Not only are businesses recognizing the changing demographics of the labor force, but they are also aware of the implications of a changing customer profile on their operations. Ted Childs, director of work force diversity at IBM, said, "We think it is important for our customers to look inside [the company] and see people like them. If they can't, it seems to me that the prospect of them becoming or staying our customer declines" (Rice 1994, p. 79). Businesses also realize the problem-solving strength of culturally diverse work teams. According to Ernest H. Drew, CEO of Hoechst Celanese, at a 1990 conference for Hoechst's top 125 officers (mostly white males) and 50 or so lower-level women and minorities, "the group split into problem-solving teams, some mixed by race and sex, others all white and male, to discuss how corporate culture affected the business and what changes might be made to improve results. When the teams presented their reports, it was obvious to Drew that the diverse teams had the broader solutions" (Rice 1994, p. 79).

Educators are also concerned with issues of minority representation in the staffing of their institutions. By 2000, it is estimated that minority students will comprise 33 percent of the school population. A great percentage of these minority students (40-55 percent) will enroll in vocational programs in community colleges. These students will need teachers from their own racial or ethnic groups who understand their practices and behaviors and who can serve as role models for their educational achievement and success (Lankard 1994).

Although the multicultural composition of the United States poses a challenge to educators, the value of such education is significant. As Pierce (1993) notes, "The overarching purpose of educating for diversity, both in and out of the workplace, is to facilitate movement on the cultural competence continuum toward advanced cultural competence and to prepare learners to challenge and restructure institutions of society to become more inclusive, just, and democratic" (pp. 4-5).

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